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ABSTRACT

Declines in high school and college attendance and completion for blacks, factors that contribute to this decline, and strategies for improvement are addressed by the Chancellor of the State University of New York. Black youth attend college disproportionate to their representation in the population, in large part because of the high school dropout rate. Blacks attending college are much less likely to complete a baccalaureate program than whites, and too few black graduate and professional students enter promising fields. Black women outnumber black men on college campuses by a substantial margin. Important variables in educational attainment are the self-image and aspiration of black youth and the pervasive stereotype that blacks are academically deficient. A broad-based effort to foster stronger, more competitive, achievement-oriented self-images is advocated. The role of the family and values such as discipline, hard work, and ambition are emphasized, as well as an important role that can be played by the black community. It is argued that strategies are needed to augment, rather than replace, affirmative action and judicial activism on behalf of blacks. Black youth need to be persuaded that they can compete on equal terms not only in athletics and a few other fields, but in all endeavors, including the intellectual. (SW)

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PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND BLACK AMERICANS:

TODAY'S CRISIS, TOMORROW'S DISASTER?

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From our country's earliest colonial days, education has been the keystone to progress. Yet increasingly large numbers of American Blacks appear to be indifferent, apathetic, or cynical toward schooling and higher learning. Today, the question I wish to ask is: Are we as Blacks experiencing a crisis of faith in education as the privileged pathway to the future?

Minorities in particular have been ardent believers in education as central to the uniquely American belief in bettering one's lot in life. It was no accident that made it a criminal offense to teach a Mississippi slave to read and write. Nor was it a coincidence that so many Black heroes during slavery were heroes of literacy, like Frederick Douglass. They realized that freeing their minds was the first and most important step toward freeing their people.

Since then, the quest for educational opportunity has been largely indistinguishable from the quest for freedom and justice. Education and equality, knowledge and power: more often than not, these goals have been one and the same for America's disenfranchised. They were one at the groundbreaking of Tuskegee Institute and Howard University. They were one and the same in Little Rock, and at Ole Miss, and at the University of Alabama. They have been one in Detroit, and in South Boston, and even in the lecture halls and anatomy labs of the School of Medicine of the University of California at Davis.

All this has been true to a greater or lesser degree for a vast cross section of Americans: working-class whites . . . women . . . the first waves of European

immigrants, and later ones from Asia, the Middle East and Latin America . . . and surely for almost every ethnic group that has sought to carve out a place for itself in our nation.

It has been especially true for Blacks — which may be another way of saying that if we cherished education more, needed it more, it was because the blanket of bigotry upon us was even coarser and more smothering than that cast over other groups. And the struggle has been longer because our first ancestors came to these shores before the Mayflower!

For Blacks, increased access to education coincided with the advance of material progress and civil rights. Among the first triumphs was the rise of independent Black academies, technical training institutes, colleges and professional schools. But in the South "separate but equal" placed a major constraint on achieving true quality and equality in our public schools. Jobs and education for their children were the dominant drives for those early Black migrants from the South to the North during the post-reconstruction era and before World War I. Thus, until the end of World War II, Blacks participated with only limited success in this century's accelerating trend toward universal schooling.

Then, with the coming of the G.I. Bill, our pent-up demand for knowledge began to escape its confines, before being explosively released in 1954 with *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. The fraction of Blacks completing high school increased from 10 percent in 1940 to 70 percent in 1980 [Healy, 1984, 1]. As late as 1965, Black enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities totaled only 274,000. By 1984, Black enrollment had multiplied nearly four times, to 1,138,000 [U.S. Bureau of Census, School Enrollment, 1985].

Until the 1960s, most of the growth in college enrollment took place on the campuses today called traditionally or historically Black. After that, the momentum of Black enrollment gains swung to the predominantly white, and especially the large public institutions. In 1960, about 96 percent of all Black college students were in 105 traditionally Black institutions; by 1984, the figure had fallen to 19 percent [Martin, 1984, 126]. Today, two-thirds of all Black college graduates receive their degrees from predominantly white campuses [Nettles and Baratz, 1985, 58].

THE EMERGING CRISIS

All this being the case, why am I and many other educators convinced that something has gone very, very wrong in education for Blacks, if not for other minorities? Why have I called it a crisis with disaster in the wings?

In recent years the pace of Black gains in education has fallen sharply and in many areas has reversed itself. The percentage of Blacks enrolling as full-time undergraduates peaked in 1978 at 10.6 percent. Thereafter there has been a gradual but steady drop each year. In 1984, the total enrollment of Blacks at all levels was a mere 8.8 percent [NCES, 1985].

What is going wrong? Well, for Blacks as well as others, the pool of college-age young people is shrinking — the "baby bust" it is called. But even though the "baby bust" is much less marked among Blacks and Hispanics than among any other group of 18 to 24-year-olds, our percentage participation rates in college are declining.

The percentage of Black high school graduates who do go on to college has remained high, and roughly comparable to the figure for other segments of the population. For example, in 1980 the Black high school completion rate nationwide was about 70 percent — much better than a generation before, but still substantially lower than the 83 percent rate for white youth.

But these figures are cruelly deceptive, because they hide a profoundly negative factor: the obscenely high dropout rates in our schools. The overall 30 percent dropout rate for Black students nationwide soars to 40 percent, 50 percent, and even higher in many central cities [Howard and Hammond, 1985, 17]. With these distressingly high rates little wonder that so many of the few who are left go on to college!

Dropping out among Black students starts as early as the primary grades and extends right through high school. In some urban areas, it has reached and passed crisis proportions. As for those who do graduate, many are academically underprepared as a result of attending classes in which keeping order has displaced rigorous instruction. Some students will have been automatically "tracked" into vocational rather than college preparatory programs, regardless of their aptitudes and abilities. Others still will have been programmed to

blame themselves for the failures of the educational system and will have come to hate the very idea of further study.

So much for our high schools. How do we fare in our colleges and universities?

At the postsecondary level, the pool of Black youth eligible for college increased by nearly 20 percent during the last half of the 1970s — but the number who actually enrolled barely held steady [Hill, 1983, 2].

As I mentioned a moment ago, the percentage of Black high school graduates who enroll in college is not much lower than for whites, but the dropout rate has so reduced the pool of high school graduates that Black young people participate in higher education well below our representation in the citizenry at large.

Once enrolled in college, Blacks are significantly less likely to complete a baccalaureate program than whites — dropping out does not end with the primary and secondary schools. Thus, the educational pipeline that was squeezed at the primary and secondary level is squeezed even further in college.

At the graduate and professional level, things look even worse. As early as 1976, the proportion of Blacks in graduate and first-professional programs had begun to fall from the already discouraging levels of the early 1970s [Hill, 1983]. Although Blacks make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, they receive only about five percent of doctoral degrees annually [Wharton, 1984].

What makes the situation gloomier still is that far too few Black graduate and professional students are going into the fields that promise the greatest opportunities for the decade ahead. In 1984, 1,049 Blacks in the U.S.A. received doctorates, but over two-thirds of them were in education and the social sciences [National Research Council, 1986]. What about the high demand fields? Listen to these national statistics: Blacks received 15 Ph.Ds in engineering, 13 in business administration, 11 in physics, 4 in mathematics, and 3 in computer science! With these numbers where do you think we will get tomorrow's Black teachers and professors for our colleges and universities?

One last point, less frequently discussed: When the Black college enrollment is separated into male and female, a shocking picture emerges of even more massive enrollment declines for Black males. Black women already outnumber Black men on college campuses by a substantial margin. In New York for example, Black females in 1983 received twice as many bachelor's degrees as Black males (2.7 percent to 5.3 percent) [New York State Education Department, 1984]. As someone who gazes out over the audience at several commencements every year, I can tell you that Black male graduates are starting to become an endangered species.

SOME QUESTIONS

Well, what does it all mean?

Have we as a people lost our faith in education?

Do we not *believe* any more that schooling is the key that opens the locked doors — or if need be, the battering ram that knocks them aside?

Why, after we have won at such terrible cost the right for our young people to attend school, has today's drop-out rate reached the point of being a national educational emergency?

After a sustained period of progress, why has Black college enrollment stalled or even begun to decline at virtually every level?

How will or can we correct for these massive losses in Black human capital — all those who were squeezed out of the educational pipeline?

Does the wider society realize the enormous cost and burden which it will ultimately pay by failing to avert the imminent disaster?

To me, these are deeply troubling questions. And many of the answers are just as troubling.

For one thing, there has been a major shift in public attitudes about equal opportunity, and especially about affirmative action. Not that long ago, there was a broad consensus about the Nation's need for atonement to Blacks and other minorities by taking positive steps to reverse the harm inflicted by past abuse and lingering discrimination. Today, the National Urban League is one of the few remaining strong, biracial organizations. Meanwhile, the U.S. Attorney General and even some members of our national Civil Rights Commission offer up statements that would reverse decades of progressive thought and action.

Many of our fellow citizens seem to believe that the need for affirmative action is past.

That affirmative action *has* made inroads is clear to most of us. But it is also clear that 30 years of affirmative action has been barely a first step toward eliminating our country's 300 years of racism and discrimination. We need steps two, three, and four down the road toward full equality. And until we get there, the old vicious cycles will remain pretty much intact. Disenfranchisement breeds poverty breeds bad neighborhoods, which in turn breed bad schools and dropouts who can't get jobs. Unemployment breeds crime and welfare dependency and homelessness. Before long you're right back where you began. Only now you have a new generation seared with the permanent brand of oppression, locked permanently into what the sociologists have begun to call the "hard-core underclass."

Is there anyone here to whom this is news?

And yet I must say that there is a sense in which this analysis, so familiar and so intellectually comfortable, is nonetheless unsatisfactory.

It is only partially adequate to explain skyrocketing dropout rates and the erosion of Black gains in higher education. And it is unsatisfying because it raises the further question of why, two or three generations ago, Blacks somehow managed to advance educational goals even though the deck was stacked even more formidably against them. The history of the National Urban League documents this. Many who are here today know that the barriers were much higher, the falls much harder — because you climbed the walls, you slipped and fell — and you rose to climb again. Whatever the remaining external, institutional barriers to education for Blacks today, they are on the whole fewer, and lower, than ever before. School integration is the law of the land. Overt discrimination in college admissions is practically unheard of. Even in its subtler forms, bigotry plays much less a part in the life of the typical campus than it did a short generation ago.

For the capable but underprepared, there are high school equivalency programs and developmental programs. For those economically in need, there are programs of financial assistance. Despite the hostile rhetoric of the current administration in Washington, the actual availability of federal financial aid has so far been only slightly curtailed. And while there is a growing barrier due to higher debt levels caused by more aid

in the form of loans, the fact is that finances are not a major obstacle.

Are persistent poverty and persistent discrimination obstacles to learning? Of course they are. Do delinquency, broken homes, alcohol and drugs, street culture, shoddy career counseling, youth unemployment, teenage pregnancy, and all the other enduring pathologies of disenfranchisement lie at the bottom of *some* of today's drop-out crisis and eroding college participation rates? No doubt about it.

But are they the root of the entire problem?

That is another question.

A harder, more complex, more intimidating question.

And — let us face it — a much touchier question. Touchier, because it may bring us face to face with other challenges, arising not altogether from discrimination, but at least in part from changes in the psychology and value system of the Black community itself.

Before continuing, let me make one thing quite clear. I have no use whatsoever for the current ideological fad that goes by the tag of "blaming the victim." I do not intend to claim that we as Blacks have become the source of our own problems. What I do want to suggest is that in education as in other important areas, Black problems have evolved into issues that cannot be resolved *solely* by traditional, institutional, "civil rights" approaches. And I want to argue that if that is indeed the case, we have an increasingly urgent obligation to explore additional, currently neglected avenues for change.

SELF-IMAGE, ASPIRATION, AND ACHIEVEMENT

If you took a sample of Black college graduates from the 1920s, '30s, '40s, and '50s, you might be able to put together a kind of composite personality profile. I have not done anything so systematic. But I have talked with and known more than a few of them. I have met them in business and industry, in politics and public service, in science and the arts. As a group, they form the backbone of faculty on today's traditionally Black campuses, and they are a smaller but vitally important presence in the faculties and administrations of our public schools and predominantly white colleges and universities.

Diverse as they are in so many ways, I have observed that Black college graduates from the '20s through the '50s tend to share several key psychological features.

They have a strong sense of self and heritage. They are family-oriented, and very often community-minded. They have tremendous drive and ambition. They know what they want to do. They know what they can do. They are not much interested in all the reasons somebody tells them why it was not ever possible for a Black to do what they want to do. All they want to know is what it will take for them to do it.

In a word, the Blacks who attended college in the '30s, '40s, and '50s were and are Blacks who *aspire* . . . and if their aspirations sometimes seem unrealistic to an outside observer, well, he'd better just stand aside and watch.

They knew they had to be twice as good as their white peers to compete successfully, but they had the self-confidence to respond to that challenge.

How does this compare with the situation facing today's Black college student?

On most college campuses we have a set of euphemisms. One is "educationally disadvantaged." Another is "academically underprepared." Yet another is "full-opportunity admit." By and large, these clumsy, unlovely phrases are almost universally interpreted to mean one thing. What they mean is "Black." The reverse is also true. Ask any faculty senate or administrative committee about Black students, and they will immediately begin to tell you more than you could possibly wish to know about special admissions tracks, free tutoring, developmental counseling, remedial reading labs, and all the other pedagogic paraphernalia associated with, not to put too fine a point on things, academic deficiency.

These views ignore that many Black students meet the same standards as all the rest without the slightest need for outside help or special dispensations.

They ignore that on most predominantly white campuses, nonminority students far outnumber the minorities in remedial classes.

They ignore, in other words, the facts. No, the link between Blacks and deficiency is as unthinking, as reflexive as the link between deficiency and Blacks. It is a stereotype, but it is a stereotype that has taken on a life of its own.

It lives in the minds of many, perhaps even the majority of Americans.

It lives in the press. It lives in Hollywood and on TV, where — "The Cosby Show" to the contrary — the story of Blacks is too often the story of an unwed, illiterate mother . . . a violent coke dealer . . . an abusive wife-beater . . . or a slightly buffoonish sidekick for a white superhero.

The stereotype also lives in the speeches of too many of our Black officials and political figures, for whom antidiscrimination and antipoverty programs are perennial issues, while industrial development and national trade competitiveness are somebody else's problem.

And most to the point for our discussion today, the stereotype is alive . . . and growing stronger every day . . . in the minds of our Black young people.

Through images, representations, the very structure of language, our society sends an overwhelming signal to today's Black youth. And the signal is: "Excellence is for other folks. Not you." In one breath we decry Jensen's idiotic theories of Black intellectual inferiority; in the next breath we act as though he might be right.

I would like to be able to say that education is an exception to this corrosive assault . . . but it is not.

From the first day of the first grade, to the moment when the last strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" fade into silence, many and perhaps most of our schools, colleges, and graduate institutions beat the same dreary drum.

Start in kindergarten. Set up "slow" classes to homogenize the classrooms. Pass the "slow" kids anyway, whether they've learned the material or not. Just make sure they know they're getting by "because they're Black."

Design "aptitude tests" and academic tracking for the "culturally impoverished."

Hire guidance counselors who automatically, even benignly, steer Black youngsters away from college, toward jobs immediately after high school, or at best toward technical curricula leading to jobs with low ceilings of advancement.

Demand dual college admissions standards — better yet, lobby for a tacit but real lowering of academic

standards for graduation, graduate school admission, and professional certification.

And so on.

And so on.

It is all reverse discrimination, in the only sense of that foolish phrase with any real meaning: discrimination by default, discrimination as the abdication of responsibility.

And I must ask: Do we think that by these shabby devices we're doing Black youngsters a service?

A *favor*?

No. What we are doing is telling them, in a hundred whispered or unspoken ways each day, that we do not really believe in them.

Is it any wonder so many of them are unable to believe in themselves?

It is hard to determine, and even harder to prove, just how thoroughly the individual's ability to compete, to excel, and to achieve are shaped by self-image — which is, of course, closely tied to the perceptions and expectations of the individual exhibited by others. But there is a large and growing body of empirical research data supporting the common-sense view that self-respect is critical to self-realization.

In a recent issue of *The New Republic*, two Black writers summed it up as follows:

> " . . . negative expectancy [among Black youth] first tends to generate failure through its impact on behavior, and then induces the individual to blame the failure on lack of ability . . . . This misattribution in turn becomes the basis for a new negative expectancy. By this process the individual, in effect, internalizes the low estimation originally held by others . . . [This internal low expectation] powerfully affects future competitive behavior and future results."
>
> [Howard and Hammond, 1985, 20]

Over the last several years, I have nursed a growing conviction that one of the most urgent needs for Black youngsters is a broad-based effort to foster stronger, more competitive, achievement-oriented self-images.

I must stress that the need is by no means universal. Studies undertaken by Professor Walter Allen at the

University of Michigan show the other side of the coin. His 1982 survey of 902 Black undergraduates at eight predominantly white institutions found that the students did not fit the stereotypic profile. Indeed, they held high aspirations and strong self-esteem.

> Sixty-three percent . . . expressed "above average" or "high" levels of self-confidence. Most students, 59%, thought they were above average or high in leadership abilities. And 76% said that overall they were high or above average people.
>
> [Allen, 1984, 5]

It takes only a moment's reflection to realize that these findings do not refute, but rather confirm my larger thesis. For the fact is that Professor Allen's respondents were *not* the high school dropouts, *not* the youngsters who never enrolled in college, but rather the self-selected successes — the survivors. Already admitted to institutions with formidable academic standards, they represented the survivors of a war of educational attrition. And not surprisingly, they succeeded because they had good high school records and came from stable, well-educated, middle-class families.

Such youngsters are thus the classic exceptions who prove the rule. But the majority of their peers . . . the majority of our young people, from kindergarten on — cry out for a massive infusion of self-esteem . . . from our society as a whole, but most directly from the Black community itself.

There are a few areas where they already have it. Nobody needs to set up remedial programs to get Black kids into sports. In athletics, they know they can compete and even dominate. They see it for themselves, on every TV network. I am not indulging in stereotype here for my own purposes. I am trying to illustrate the effects of expectation on self-image and standards of performance. For unless you hold the dubious belief that Blacks as a group are innately and overwhelmingly superior to whites as athletes, you are forced to conclude that sports are a field we have excelled in because sports are a field we *believe* we can excel in. And our youth are willing to work long and grueling hours of practice and study so as to measure up.

Where is our comparable "intellectual competitiveness" — our "intellectual work-ethic"?

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

I suspect that if you look carefully at the matter, you will find strong self-images and driving personal aspirations most deeply rooted in tight-knit, supportive, and — indeed, yes — demanding families.

Such families were a prominent part of Black America during the first half of this century. Their presence probably goes a long way toward explaining how those Black high school and college graduates of the '30s, '40s, and '50s could accomplish so much, even against such appalling odds. Recently many of us have begun to ask again about the role of the family and the critical importance of the values embodied in strong families — discipline, hard work, ambition, self-sacrifice, patience, and love.

It is easy enough to mock such values as bourgeois. But middle-class or not, they increasingly appear to constitute the spiritual foundation for achievement — the psychological infrastructure, if you will, for both personal growth and full participation in the world around us.

If you doubt that such values are vital for intellectual growth, let me refer you to a recent study comparing the reading and mathematics skills of first and fifth graders in the United States (Minneapolis), Taiwan (Taipei) and Japan (Sendai). The sample included 1,400 students in the three countries. Its central finding was that the American students, who scored lower, did less homework, spent less time in school, and were more likely to engage in irrelevant, nonacademic activities while in class. But the study also noted the pivotal role of family values. American parents, it seems, now place less importance on homework and are less likely to push their children to achieve than parents in Japan and Taiwan. The researchers speculated that the old American "work-ethic" appears now to appeal more to Asians than to Americans themselves, at least insofar as it pertains to basic schooling [Fiske, 1984]. No wonder the newest Asian immigrant children are winning all the prizes.

Black gains in education and elsewhere have stalled at a time when the Black family as an institution has been under severe stress. I believe that is no coincidence. And so I must urge the rehabilitation of the Black family as an institution for the transmission of sound values.

It is difficult to know all that such a job entails, or

how we might do it. But even given the reservoir of good faith and commitment that still exists among whites such as you who are here this afternoon, it is a job that the Black community must undertake largely for itself. It is a job that requires us to look mainly inward, to our own needs and potentials, rather than exclusively outward for assistance or reparations. And it is a job that calls for resources of creativity and strength that our own history documents in inspiring abundance.

THE NEED FOR A "SECOND FRONT"

Yet again, let me emphasize: I am not among that small group of Blacks who have gained recent attention for their indifference and even their disdain toward affirmative action and other forms of civil rights activism.

We have a full unfinished agenda covering the entire educational ladder. On one end, for example, we need to fight for per capital pupil expenditures in our Black inner cities which will at least equal those in our white suburbs. At the graduate level end, we need many more programs like the recently announced $9 million program of the Ford Foundation to increase the pool of minority doctoral students.

The day for affirmative action is far from past. Realism compels us to recognize that it will be a long time before we have exhausted the need for legislative remedies to injustice and regulatory reform of institutions. Nor have we reached a point where we can, even if we wanted, move forward without our white compatriots' ongoing commitment. Yes, we need leaders and friends like David Kearns, Ralph Davidson, Coy Eklund, Bill LaMothe, John Akers and Don Keough. The help of thousands like them are essential if we are to achieve our ultimate goal.

But realism also compels us to recognize that for a growing segment of the Black population, despair has acquired a self-sustaining momentum. Welfare dependency, crime, unemployment, illegitimacy, and many other social pathologies arose initially from systematic disenfranchisement; today, they no longer require the negative energies of overt external discrimination to keep them running.

And to confront and reverse these pathologies, I am increasingly convinced that we need something new. We need strategies not to replace affirmative action and judicial activism, but to augment them.

While pressing the traditional lines of attack, we also need to open a second front.

We need to strengthen the Black family, particularly in communities where its structure and role have been progressively eroded over the last generation.

We need to reassert the relevance of self-respect and high aspiration, and we have to persuade Black youth that they can compete on equal terms not only in athletics and a few other circumscribed fields, but in fact across the whole spectrum of human striving — including the intellectual.

Above all, we need to ask more of our own leadership. We have to call upon the growing cadre of Black leaders in business, labor, science, the arts, and education, as well as the traditional Black leaders in the churches and government. We must ask them to tell the country that the Black agenda is more than guarding Black "turf" or constantly repeating the litany of only Black issues.

In addition to national Black leaders, we need more national leaders who are Black. We need to remind our country that the war on poverty and discrimination is not just a Black issue, but an issue that directly affects the material and spiritual interest of every American. And we have to insist that the Black stake in America is a stake in the whole society. It is a stake in the full range of challenges and opportunities our country faces at the brink of the 21st century.

We need to open a second front, with a different set of strategies and tactics. The National Education Initiative adopted last year by the National Urban League represents a major opening volley on such a second front. I proudly congratulate John Jacob and the League for their nationwide crusade of educational renewal. Your five-year effort through your 113 affiliates will prove to be a critical venture. I would particularly single out the League's "Math Count" program in Chicago, because it seems to me very much a prototype of the kind of innovative, creative, and positive efforts that offer a new kind of promise. It is a program that builds self-respect and nourishes high aspiration among our Black youth. It teaches them that they can compete and succeed. It aims at fostering skills and abilities that remove the ceiling to upward mobility in the society at large.

This is not the only program we should examine.

There are others. This morning we heard of the outstanding efforts of Dr. Comer in New Haven and the CED program in Rochester. Each relies upon the only kind of resources and commitment that have never failed us — the resources and commitment of the Black community and its historic biracial coalitions such as the National Urban League.

CONCLUSION

Today's appalling school dropout rate and stalling of progress in higher education are only two aspects of what I believe to be an impending educational crisis for Black Americans.

It is a crisis that may, as I have suggested in the title of my speech, be transformed all too soon into outright disaster.

And yet despite everything — despite the unexpected problems and reversals of progress . . . despite all the broken promises and heartbreaking setbacks — my counsel is not, finally, a counsel of despair.

I recall Langston Hughes' famous oft-quoted poem, "Mother to Son":

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
and splinters
and boards torn up,
and places with no carpets on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners
And sometimes goin' in the dark,
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back
Don't you set down on the steps.
Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now —
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin'
And life for me ain't been no
crystal stair.

It's been no crystal stair for any of us.

But for all the tacks and splinters and bare broken boards, we have reached one landing after another. We see the proof of our landings embodied in laws and institutions. We see them in our increased numbers in positions of prominence and influence. And we see

them in matters less tangible, such as the strong, continuing support of enlightened white citizens for the National Urban League and other organizations devoted to justice and opportunity.

We have turned some corners, too. And it may be that we are turning another one, in asking ourselves whether we do not have an obligation to place the same high value as our fellow citizens on the fundamental American values of self-reliance and aspiration.

I said it before: again and again, the resources and commitment that have never failed us have always been those of the Black community itself. They are rooted in an enduring faith that we *can* overcome — we *can* achieve our goal of full equality.

In the final analysis, *we* are the ones who can and who must eradicate the insulting and infinitely destructive equation our society continues to make between Blackness and inferiority.

We are the ones who can and who must reassert the Black claim on excellence — for our young people, no less than for ourselves.

After all the years of climbing, we know the weariness all too well. But we also know the perils of sitting down to rest.

And in these darkening years of our century's close, there are times when the illumination of truth and compassion seems to have flickered or even failed.

Must it be that we will have to light our own way?

If so, let our lamp be the lamp of learning . . . and let it burn brighter today than yesterday, and brighter tomorrow than today.

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